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The Dramatist, the Text, and the Director: reflections on an ever-intriguing triangle¹

Кляйн Хольгер. Драматург, текст і режисер: роздуми про вічно інтригуючий трикутник.

Автор статті розмірковує над сутністю переосмислення текстів п'єс великого англійського драматурга у численних театральних постановках та кіноверсіях. При цьому він висловлюється проти нівелювання понять «автор» і «текст п'єси», що нерідко спостерігається у наукових розвідках ХХ–ХХІ століть. Таке розмивання концептів авторства та драматичного тексту властиве, зокрема, і деяким режисерським роботам – театральним та кінематографічним інтерпретаціям шекспірівських творів.

До основних режисерських рішень, які засвідчують вільне поводження з першоджерелом, належать: скорочення певних сцен або епізодів, вербальні та невербальні додавання, зміни у послідовності подій і промов, надмірне акцентування окремих деталей (приміром, кольору), використання деяких предметів, голос за кадром тощо. Як підкреслює автор статті, у вільній країні режисер керується натхненням і може вільно репрезентувати власну інтерпретацію драматичного твору.

Ключові слова: драматург, текст, режисер, сцена, вистава, інтерпретація, презентація, порівняння, конкретизація.

I. Comparisons

Far from being 'odorous' (Dogberry in *Much Ado* 3.5), or rather 'odious' (John Fortescue in *De laudibus legum*

¹ This article is based on a lecture delivered at the X-th Shakespeare Festival in Gyula, July 2014.

Angliae, Ch. 19, begetting a proverb maliciously taken up in Donne's "The Comparison"), comparisons are part of our existence, are normal in daily life. In general we compare what is for us the first embodiment of anything with whatever we have known before. Thus in *The Tempest*, Act 1 Scene 2, Miranda says of Ferdinand "I might call him / A thing divine; for nothing natural / I ever saw so noble". Thinking of Prospero and Caliban, her reaction would not surprise even if Ferdinand were only average.

In Plato's *Republic*, Chapter 10 builds on comparisons. The concept or *idea* of bed or table is, according to Socrates, the only real bed, real table; what a joiner makes is a partial, and therefore incomplete and imperfect imitation of that real thing. The same goes for all objects and actions, as well as, by permissible extrapolation, for stones and plants, for animals and people.

What a painter paints, or a poet describes (e.g. Homer's famous description of Achilles' shield in the *Iliad* XVIII.478.608)² results in the partial imitation of a partial imitation. One may view Shakespeare's – or any other dramatist's – plays, and their productions in the light of the Platonic model. The text is the equivalent of the idea, each production of the text on stage or screen is a partial imitation of it. However, a better term than 'imitation' in this connection is Roman Ingarden's 'concretisation'.³

² See esp. Lessing in *Laokoon* [1767], Ch. XVIII, ed. [and transl.?] William A. Steel (London: Dent / New York: Dutton 1930, repr. 1970), p. 67f.; important modern studies include Wolfgang Schadewaldt, "Der Schild des Achilles" in *Homer: Die Dichtung und ihre Deutung*, ed. Joachim Latacz (Darmstadt: WBG 1991), pp. 173-199 and Andrew Sprague Becker, *The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis*, Lanham, MD / London: Rowman & Littlefield 1995.

³ See: Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art* [origin. in German, 1931], transl. George Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern UP 1973), § 57, p. 317ff. and § 62, p. 333ff.

II. Shakespeare the Dramatist

Since Delia Bacon in 1857 advanced the view that the works of Shakespeare were really written by Sir Francis Bacon, the claims for alternatives to the glover's son of Stratford have multiplied. Yet there is no serious alternative to Will Shakespeare. The search for others arose from the erroneous assumption that someone with a patchy education could not write such plays,⁴ that geniuses are in all respects people like you and me.

A more serious and invidious questioning of the dramatist has emerged through various attempts at dismantling the concept of authorship in the wake of Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes (one remembers particularly Barthes' "The Death of the Author", 1967), combined with assertions of the primacy of the stage. Thus, for instance, Holderness and Loughrey describe the dramatist as solely an "authorial function" within the framework of a "highly collaborative cultural form".⁵ Already some fifty years earlier, Brecht had imagined Shakespeare and his fellow-actors at the Globe jointly experimenting with the texts every day.⁶

Early modern drama was undoubtedly collaborative in many respects. And this has continued to our times, as among others Brown highlights.⁷ The concept is only invidious when it is used to level the author, to deny the dramatist his or her creative gift and originary role.

Now whether you call him – or her – "authorial function" or, with Barthes, "scriptor", or use any other fancy

⁴ See the hilarious fun Richard Armour makes of this in *Twisted Tales from Shakespeare* (London: Hammond 1958, repr. 1966), pp. 153-156.

⁵ *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet Prince of Denmarke*, ed. Graham Holderness / Bryan Loughrey (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1992), p. 16.

⁶ Bertolt Brecht, *Der Messingkauf* [origin. 1939/40] in *Schriften zum Theater*, Vol. 5, ed. W. Hecht (Frankfurt / Main 1963), p. 124.

⁷ J.R. Brown, *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance* (London: Arnold 1966, repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1969), passim, esp. 15.

term, without the dramatist, there would be no text, reducing the theatre to pantomime and improvisation – an unattractive option. The primacy of the dramatists and their texts must be upheld. Texts may not *only* be a precondition to performance⁸, but they certainly are that.

This issue touches another, that of conflicting claims of page and stage. Differences of opinion between a literary and a theatre-oriented view of Shakespeare's plays have long existed; thus, for instance, in 1955 Alexander reproached Granville-Barker for considering the texts "Raw material for acting".⁹ And the conflict continues. In 1988 Charney (sharpening up Brown's stance of 1966),¹⁰ surmised that the playwright thought his script "a blueprint for performance".¹¹ And Orgel argued: "One indisputable fact about the plays is that they were written not for publication but for performance: they are, in their inception at least, not books but scripts, designed to be realized on the stage. So the authentic text in this case is the acting text, at least if we are going to take Shakespeare's intentions into account".¹²

There are good reasons to question someone's knowledge of Shakespeare's intentions. And the trouble with calling the acting text the authentic text is that there is no such thing as *the* acting text – there have been very many of

⁸ Peter Holland, "Hamlet: Text in Performance" in *Hamlet*, ed. Peter J. Smith / Nigel Wood (Buckingham / Philadelphia: Open UP 1996), p. 63 formulates it more, indeed far too, negatively: "the written play is a very imperfect technical basis for a theatre production".

⁹ Peter Alexander, *Hamlet Father and Son* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1955), p. 1. He gives no reference; in the obvious place, Harley Granville-Barker's Preface to *Hamlet* (London: Batsford 1930, repr. 1963), I could not find this precise formulation, but there are similar ones in that fascinating book.

¹⁰ John Russell Brown, *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance* (London: Arnold 1966, repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1969), *passim*, but see esp. p. 15.

¹¹ Maurice Charney, *Hamlet' Fictions* (New York / London: Routledge 1988), p. 51.

¹² Stephen Orgel, "The Authentic Shakespeare", *Representations* 21 (Winter 1988), p. 6.

them and there will be more; are they all authentic? Hardly. Besides, Orgel could not have chosen, as his prime example, a more unsuitable and text than the Dering MS of *Henry IV*. Moreover, particularly Erne has convincingly argued that Shakespeare must have regarded not only his poems but also his playtexts as literature.¹³

Above all, there is no need to decide and choose. The plays were written to be performed, yes; at the same time, they represent a grand body of dramatic literature that has engaged, fascinated and delighted not only countless viewers but also readers all over the globe. And, *pace* Hawkes, there is no 'dwindling'¹⁴ involved in the dual use to which the world has put these texts.

III. The Text

The word 'texts' does, as we know, in its turn throw up grave difficulties. With regard to most plays a great measure of common consent has been reached, though some things remain unresolved. As my argument does not hinge on disputed textual details I use the term 'text' here pragmatically to mean what one can read in any reliable modern edition. To give some examples: When Franco Zeffirelli in his 1968 film *Romeo and Juliet* has Laurence Olivier speak the prologue to Act 1 and the play's last four lines as voice-over (whereas John Gielgud does appear on stage in Alvin Rakoff's 1978 film) and when Zeffirelli cuts the prologue to Act 2, this is not the text; and when in the 2010 production of the play at the Globe Theatre both prologues are spoken, but divided up between three speakers, this is not the text either. These particulars and others are not in the text, but many are compatible with it in these fascinating concretizations.

¹³ Lucas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2003.

¹⁴ Terence Hawkes, *That Shakespeherian Rag* (London / New York : Methuen 1986), p. 86.

IV. The Director

'The director' here stands for the theatre and its technical potential, for the actors, the stage manager, the prompter, the technicians, and indeed all the people working together to put a play on stage. The term recommends itself not only for its shortness but also because many directors have guided their players towards drastic reworkings of texts, often in ways I would consider incompatible with them.

Thus in 1.5 (1.4 having been cut) of *Hamlet*: the Ghost in Leander Haußmann's 2013 Berlin *Hamlet* production, eager to tell his tale, comes upon Hamlet having sex with Ophelia. It remains an open question whether or not Ophelia's sexual allusions in 4.5 point to experience or to disordered fantasy. Haußmann clearly inclines to the first interpretation, and so does Kenneth Branagh: in his 1996 *Hamlet* Ophelia's and Hamlet's sexual encounters flash upon her mind during Polonius's harangue in 1.3. However, at the point at which Haußmann introduces this motif on stage it cannot be squared with the text.

Another such case of a director's violently going off the text occurred in Sebastian Hartmann's 2007 Vienna Burgtheater production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Here Friar Laurence was first seen from behind, his naked bottom frantically moving up and down on a stretched-out female 'ghost of History' (dreamt up by Hartmann) before rising, putting his habit in order and ruminating on the medicinal powers of his simples as in the text's Act 2 Scene 3.

Of course any director can do with a Shakespeare text whatever she likes and can persuade the actors to go along with: adhere closely to the text, or place new emphases, re-order it, cut it up, or turn historical tragedy into a farce (as an unrepentant Claus Peymann did *Richard II* in Berlin in 2000) and so forth. Moreover, at times external factors decisively alter the perception of a play. To mention only the darkest case: after Auschwitz *The Merchant of Venice* can never be

whatever it was before.¹⁵ To sum up: the director can in a free country freely follow his or her own inspiration and interpretation (Peter Brook's *Hamlet* of 2000, filmed 2002, is a particularly impressive example, honestly called an adaptation). And different, or indeed conflicting interpretations of any play are witnesses to its power and attraction.

Whether regarded as successful or not, directorial operations can do no harm either to the audience or to Shakespeare and his texts. And one can learn something about a Shakespeare play from any and every production or adaptation, from Nahum Tate's *King Lear* of 1682 to the *Marowitz Hamlet* of 1965 and beyond, no matter what one thinks of it. However, spectators in their turn can do with any production whatever they like, clap, praise and cherish, or boo, whistle (something happening far too rarely these days), and condemn.

V. The Plays on Stage and Screen

Presenting a number of aspects the concretisations of which can be compared in different productions returns us to the Platonic model. Not as used, paradoxically, by Orgel (p. 12): "The play is conceived here as a platonic idea, only imperfectly represented by its text", but as used by Charney, who writes: "The Platonic idea of the play¹⁶ must have a slightly different manifestation at each performance ...".¹⁷ One should add: in each *production*, and not just "slightly different" but often *markedly* so. Kott seems to point in the same direction as Charney: "One can only perform one of several *Hamlets* potentially existing in this arch-play. It will

¹⁵ Zeno Ackermann and Sabine Schülting are working on the post-war reception and productions of *The Merchant*. See for their project: <http://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/v/shylock/>. A book is in progress.

¹⁶ A notion rather too easily dismissed by Holland (p. 70).

¹⁷ *Hamlet's Fictions* (see note 11 above), again p. 51.

always be a poorer *Hamlet* than Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is; but it may also be a *Hamlet* enriched by being of our time."¹⁸

For practical purposes I exclude 'Shakespeare Offshoots' (Ruby Cohn), also productions in far-away countries with very different theatrical traditions. And I only discuss single elements, not entire productions. The borderline between Dessen's 'rescripting' and 'rewriting'¹⁹ is surely elastic; my simple selection of aspects embraces both. Lastly, for my purpose here differences between theatrical and cinematic concretizations are immaterial.

The first aspect are cuts. They are practically universal and have a venerable tradition, the plays normally being too long for stage or screen (though Deborah Warner and Peter Stein have shown it can be done). Leaving aside the elimination of characters, I wish to consider three questions: the dimensions of the cuts, their effect on the play's balance, and their impact on the impression created at climactic moments.

Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) can serve as a starting point for all three. His cuts are numerous. And some do affect the play's balance by eliminating two comic episodes: Act 2, Scene 1, Mercutio and Benvolio's vain search for Romeo, which in the text prolong the separation of the lovers' highly emotional first meeting in 1.5 from the equally emotional and romantic balcony scene 2.2. And in 4.5 the loss of the earthy, humorous musician episode with Peter, which in the text relaxes tension by separating the tragic (if mistaken) lament of Juliet's family and Romeo's lament in Mantua. By comparison, some longer cuts in the 2009 Globe production of *As You Like It*, especially the forester scene 4.2 and the pages scene 5.3 seem innocuous; though these cuts,

¹⁸ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* [origin. in Polish 1964], transl. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen 1965), p. 47.

¹⁹ See Alan C. Dessen, *Rescripting Shakespeare: The Text, The Director, and Modern Productions*. Cambridge: CUP 2002.

involving songs, diminish the holiday atmosphere of the play, its overall balance is not upset. That does happen, however, when in Tony Richardson's *Hamlet* film of 1969 and Gregory Doran's production of *Hamlet* 2008 (filmed 2009) the story ends with Horatio's "flights of angels" (5.2.352),²⁰ leaving the rest untold.

Some of Zeffirelli's cuts do affect the impression created at climactic moments. For instance, he eliminates forebodings:²¹ Romeo's prior to entering the Capulet's palace for the ball "I fear, too early; for my mind misgives..." (1.4.106) and Juliet's "O God, I have an ill-divining soul!..." (3.5.54) as Romeo leaves her the morning after. Zeffirelli also cuts Juliet's soliloquies, her love-fired invocation of night in 3.2 which intensifies the contrast between her expectant mood and what follows, and also her fears before drinking the potion in 4.3, both of which the 2009 Globe production with Ellie Kendrick movingly presents.

The gravest instance of changed effect in Zeffirelli occurs at the end. The Prince repeats, as a shout, "All are punish'd" (5.3.294 – pronouncing it, presumably for the sake of emphasis: "punishèd") before disappearing, and the Capulet-Montague reconciliation is left out.

A second, rarer aspect are additions. Often they concern non-verbal elements. In 1.5 Zeffirelli introduces a singer who draws the whole party into a circle around him, so that Romeo and Juliet meet unobserved. There is much modern music at both ends of the Globe *Romeo and Juliet*, particularly remarkable at the end: The Prince's last speech is followed by a dirge, then the corpses revive, get up, and all join singing in a modern stamping dance (somewhat similar

²⁰ For easy reference all quotations from Shakespeare reproduce the text as given in *The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Alexander (London / Glasgow: Collins, 1951, repr. 1960).

²¹ See as an early study of this device Wolfgang Clemen, "Anticipation and Foreboding in Shakespeare's Early Histories", *ShS* 6 (1953), pp. 25-35.

to Michael Cacoyannis's 1964 film *Alexis Sorbas*). The Globe proceeds similarly with *As You Like It*. Jaunty jazz at the beginning, a long concert between Act 3.2 and 3.3 to mark what they call the Second Part. And before Rosalind's epilogue all actors join in a measured kind of country dance, which abruptly changes to another bout of modern music and wild stamping, the same as initially, so that as with *Romeo and Juliet*, jazz frames the performance.

Also visual inserts are common in productions; one remembers Hamlet's arrival from Wittenberg, galloping on a white horse in Kozintsev's film of 1964; another instance is the silent bedroom scene in Zeffirelli's 1967 film *The Taming of the Shrew*. It follows Petruchio's line 4.1.164: "Come, I will bring thee to thy bridal chamber" and climaxes in Katherine's stunning Petruchio with a frying pan.

Verbal additions are less common. There are short instances in 2.1 of Klaus Maria Brandauer's 2002 Vienna *Hamlet* and in 2.5 of the Globe *As You Like It*. A long, intertextual (and unfitting) case of addition is found in Haußmann's *Hamlet*, 1.3. There Polonius inserts into line 123 the soliloquy ending scene 1.2 of *Troilus and Cressida*, in which Cressida decides not to be easily won.

A third aspect is the sequence of speeches and events. In the Globe *As You Like It* the end of 5.2 is combined with dialogue from 5.4.5ff. And in Richardson's *Hamlet* the King's 3.3 soliloquy is inserted between the sending away of Hamlet in 4.3 and the coastal scene 4.4. However, the non plus ultra in the frequency and magnitude of re-ordering seems achieved both by Brook's 2000 *Hamlet* and by Haußmann's.

A large if very diverse area are significant details of presentation. One such detail is colour. In the 2009 Globe production of *As You Like It* the God Hymen is black, setting off an immortal from the mortals. By contrast, in the Globe production of *Romeo and Juliet* Romeo's being black quickly acquires the air of normalcy, he is just a good-looking, strong

and lively youngster. In *Othello*, on the other hand, colour is a discriminatory factor, is used against him by Brabantio and Iago. Trevor Nunn's 1989 RSC production showed Willard White as Othello, a real black man as opposed to the blackened faces of white actors, particularly in earlier concretisations, for instance Olivier's at the National Theatre in 1964. By contrast, Anthony Hopkins in the 1981 BBC *Othello* film is definitely white, but for everyone on stage he is black, and one quickly comes to accept this.

Voice-over is another detail, mainly of film technique. Famous examples are Olivier's "To be or not to be" soliloquy (3.1.56-88) in his film (1949), and Kozintsev's Hamlet silently walking through the festive crowd in 1.2 while we hear "Oh that this too, too sullied flesh would melt" (lines 129ff.). In Olivier's as in Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film (and mostly in Doran's), Hamlet's "Now might I do it pat, ..." (3.3.73) is given thus in order to increase verisimilitude. Hamlet's being close behind Claudius (as opposed to Rodney Bennett's 1980 BBC film, where he remains at a sizeable distance) strains our suspension of disbelief when he speaks aloud; yet Brook shows with Adrian Lester that this can also be effective.

In some cases objects symbolize an important element of the play. Gert Voss as Lear in Luc Bondy's 2004 Vienna production tore the map of Britain into strips – a fitting symbol of what will happen to the country (more effective than Olivier indicating borderlines with his sword on a map on the floor in Michael Elliott's 1983 film). Already at the opening of Doran's *Hamlet* a surveillance camera indicates the play's pervasive spying. And in 4.5 Ophelia is seen in front of the glass Hamlets bullet cracked when he shot Polonius in 3.4. In Olivier's *Hamlet* the sight and sound of the surging sea serves as a *leitmotif*, perhaps sparked off by Gertrude's remark 4.1.7: "Mad as the sea and wind ...".

Lastly, there are many ways – all of them partial – of presenting a vital moment. For instance, Hamlet's exit in 4.3. Doran has David Tennant pushed out, strapped to a wheelchair, which makes his "But come, for England" (line 49) merely pathetic; similarly Branagh is violently dragged off. This is not suggested by the text, which has Hamlet, at the external nadir of his fortunes, seizing command of the situation even in his leaving, as is indicated by Claudius's words to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "Follow him at foot; tempt him with speed aboard" (line 54). Olivier, Neil Williamson in Richardson, and Derek Jacobi in Bennett showed precisely this.

VI. Coda

In view of the material presented and of countless other manifestations of Shakespeare's presence in today's world, one can only say that Jonson's assertion in 1623: "He was not of an age, but for all time!" has proved a gloriously fulfilled prophecy. And Shakespeare criticism, especially during the last hundred years have produced an amazing mass and scope of new approaches, of new or reshaped and resharpened questions asked, aspects and qualities seen, connections established, and conclusions drawn. And numerous modern productions of his plays have demonstrated many worthwhile possibilities of concretization. One very persuasive explanation of the Shakespeare phenomenon was formulated by Goethe in 1813: "About Shakespeare so much has already been said, that it may seem as if there were nothing left to say, and yet it is the property of the spirit that it for ever animates and inspires the spirit."²²

²² My translation of the original; cf. "Shakespeare und kein Ende" in *Werke*, Vol. 12, ed. Herbert von Einem / Hans Joachim Schrimpf (Hamburg: Wegner 1953, repr. 1960), p. 287.